

# Character Builder 您好嗎？

The basic unit of the Chinese language is the *zi* (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each *zi* has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string *zi* together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each *zi* is pronounced in one of four tones:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest)

To pronounce each *zi* below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about dental care

Putonghua pronunciation: *zhu4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jue3*

Meanings: eat, erode

蛀 (radical 虫 *chong2* = worm/bug) means gnaw/eat away materials. 蛀蟲 (*zhu4 chong2* = eating-worms/bugs = clothing moths/woodworms) include 衣魚 (*yi1 yü2* = clothes~fish = silverfish/bookworm), 米象 (*mi3 xiang4* = rice~elephant = rice weevil).

Facetiously, 蛀米大蟲 (*zhu4 mi3 da4 chong2* = eating-rice-big-worms) means lazy-bone, 蛀書蟲 (*zhu4 shu1 chong2* = gnawing-book-worms) means nerd.

Dentist warns: 吃糖 (*chi1 tang2* = eating~sugar/candy), 吸煙 (*xi1 yan1* = inhale~smoke/cigarette = smoking) cause 牙垢 (*ya2 gou4* = teeth~dirt = tartar), 牙菌斑 (*ya2 jün1 ban1* = teeth~bacteria/microorganisms~patch = dental plaque), 牙周炎 (*ya2 zhou1 yan2* = teeth~around-inflammation = periodontitis). “蛀牙” (*zhu4 ya2* = eaten~teeth) = “齲齒” *qü3 chi3* = sick-teeth = dental caries), means decayed/rotten tooth.

by Diana Yue